

FIELD



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EDITORS *Stuart Friebert*
 Alberta Turner
 David Walker
 David Young

BUSINESS *Dolorus Nevels*
MANAGER

COVER *Stephen J. Farkas, Jr.*

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CONTENTS

<i>Adrienne Rich</i>	5	<i>Then or Now</i>
<i>Yusef Komunyakaa</i>	10	<i>The House</i>
<i>Beckian Fritz Goldberg</i>	12	<i>I Have Lived Here All My Life</i>
	13	<i>Amazon</i>
	14	<i>The First House is Burning</i>
	17	<i>Flowering Adam</i>
<i>Bruce Beasley</i>	19	<i>Primavera</i>
	21	<i>By Bread Alone</i>
<i>James Tate</i>	26	<i>At the Days End Motel</i>
<i>Jonah Winter</i>	27	<i>Event Horizon in Bar Valhalla, New York</i>
<i>Russell Edson</i>	29	<i>The Laboratory</i>
	30	<i>The Square Wheel</i>
<i>Killarney Clary</i>	31	<i>"The wild boy of Aveyron . . ."</i>
	32	<i>"'Cicadas sizzle in the fields beyond the hum of screens . . .'"</i>
	33	<i>"Of a heavy butterfly . . ."</i>
<i>Matthew Cooperman</i>	34	<i>An Interview with Charles Wright</i>
<i>Yannis Ritsos</i>	45	<i>Post Script</i>
	46	<i>Painting Stones</i>
	47	<i>Garden in Autumn</i>
	48	<i>People and Suitcases</i>
	49	<i>Not Quite</i>
	50	<i>Self-Knowledge</i>
	51	<i>Closing Words</i>
<i>Rod Jellema</i>	52	<i>Herm Wyken to Himself</i>
	53	<i>Young Man at the Laundromat, Watching the Spinning Dryers</i>

Yu Xuanji	54	<i>Washing Yarn Temple</i>
	55	<i>Melancholy Thoughts</i>
	56	<i>Selling the Last Peonies</i>
	57	<i>Love Letter to Li Zi-An</i>
	58	<i>Visiting Master Zhao and Not Finding Him</i>
	59	<i>Tribute to a Master Alchemist</i>
	60	<i>Sent to Secretary Liu</i>
Frederick Tibbetts	61	<i>The Engulfed Cathedral</i>
	63	<i>Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance</i>
Sandra McPherson	64	<i>The Spaces Between Birds</i>
	67	<i>Images</i>
	69	<i>Poem for My Fifty-first Birthday</i>
Martin Mooney	70	<i>At a Boat Burning</i>
	71	<i>Whites</i>
Betsy Sholl	72	<i>The Stream</i>
	74	<i>Test Patterns</i>
	76	<i>The Tiny Gate</i>
Diane Glancy	78	<i>The Great American Bottom</i>
	79	<i>Monet's Water Lilies</i>
Martha Collins	80	<i>Okay So What</i>
	81	<i>Later That Day</i>
	83	<i>Floor Study</i>

Poetry 1994: A Review-Essay

David Young	84	<i>Lines of Force</i>
		<i>Peggy Shumaker, Wings Moist from the Other World</i>
		<i>Forrest Gander, Deeds of Utmost Kindness</i>
		<i>Sophie Cabot Black, The Misunder- standing of Nature</i>
		<i>David St. John, Study for the World's Body</i>

THEN OR NOW

*Is it necessary for me to write obliquely
about the situation? Is that what you
would have me do?*

Food Packages: 1947

Powdered milk, chocolate bars, canned fruit, tea,
salamis, aspirin:
Four packages a month to her old professor in Heidelberg
and his Jewish wife:
Europe is trying to revive an intellectual life
and the widow of the great sociologist needs flour.

Europe is trying/to revive/
with the Jews somewhere else.

The young ex-philosopher tries to feed her teachers
all the way from New York, with orders for butter from
Denmark,
sending dispatches into the fog
of the European spirit:
*I am no longer German. I am a Jew and the German language
was once my home.*

1993

Innocence: 1945

"The beauty of it was the guilt.
It entered us, quick *schnapps*,
forked tongue of ice. The guilt
made us feel innocent again.
We had done nothing while some
extreme measures were taken. We drifted. In the
Snow Queen's huge ballroom had dreamed
of the whole world and a new pair of skates.
But we had suffered too.
The miracle was: felt
nothing. Felt we had done
nothing. Nothing to do. Felt free.
And we had suffered, too.
It was that freedom we craved,
cold needle in the bloodstream.
Guilt after all was a feeling."

1993

Sunset, December, 1993

Dangerous of course to draw
parallels Yet more dangerous to write

as if there were a steady course, we and our poems
protected: the individual life, protected

poems and ideas gliding
in mid-air, innocent

I walked out on the deck and every board
was luminous with cold dew It could freeze tonight

Each board is different of course but each does gleam
wet, under a complicated sky: mounds of swollen ink

heavy grey unloading up the coast
a rainbow suddenly and casually

unfolding its span
Dangerous not to think

how the earth still was in places
while the chimneys shuddered with the first dischargements

1993

Deportations

It's happened already while we were still
searching for patterns A turn of the head
toward a long horizontal window overlooking the city
to see people being taken away
neighbors, vendors, paramedicals
hurried from their porches, their tomato stalls
their auto-mechanic arguments
and children from schoolyards
There are far more of the takers-away than the taken
at this point anyway

Then: dream-cut: our house:
four men walk through the unlatched door
One in light summer wool and silken tie
One in work clothes browned with blood
One with open shirt, a thin
thong necklace hasped with silver around his neck
One in shorts naked up from the navel

And they have come for us, two of us and four of them
and I think, perhaps they are still human
and I ask them *When do you think this all began?*

as if trying to distract them from their purpose
as if trying to appeal to a common bond
as if one of them might be you
as if I were practising for something
yet to come

1994

And Now

And now as you read these poems
—you whose eyes and hands I love
—you whose mouth and eyes I love
—you whose words and minds I love—
don't think I was trying to state a case
or construct a scenery:
I tried to listen to
the public voice of our time
tried to survey our public space
as best I could
—tried to remember and stay
faithful to details, note
precisely how the air moved
and where the clock's hands stood
and who was in charge of definitions
and who stood by receiving them
when the name of compassion
was changed to the name of guilt
when to feel with a human stranger
was declared obsolete.

1994

THE HOUSE

Her bedroom's decorated with faces
of Rudy Vallee, Ginger Rogers,
& Princess Margaret Rose.

A shock of brightness
pushes me into a room of white
banners & swastikas unfurled

like a field blooming smoke.
I face a gelatinous photo
of pale children running

hands over a black man's
head. They aren't rubbing
his kinky hair for luck,

or gazing into a make-believe
crystal ball to measure
themselves against mystery.

When touching their own
hair, did they trace
from crown to nape,

to the meaning of death?
If they were now here,
would their fingers

strain not to touch my head
as I glimpse a battalion
of multicolored tulips

near the canal? I feel
Anne Frank stood here
happy with the world,

watching yellow stars
slip into this house
anywhere they could.

If harm hid underneath
floorboards, inside walls,
it couldn't touch her.

As she grew, her height
was marked on a door
like calibrations for a mortar.

After the phrenology
of passionfruit & apples
in The Garden, a good

year before stealing
into her hidingplace,
before the moon untied

blood, she lingered there
on the edge of ascension,
surrendering to a blond boy's kiss.

I HAVE LIVED HERE ALL MY LIFE

No, I don't understand my country:
so quiet, grassy, full of ruminant animals,
low light, the thinned volumes of trees.
The chickens dizzy on nectar. I said I'll
go crazy living. Bells walk down
the highway there — I never knew

I was so faithful as a child and kept it all
and believed the first things I saw,
little bell-herder at dusk. Look,

the moon is lost eating and thinking.
And the past needs somewhere to go.

The past isn't big like a world but small
like the Urals, like Hungary —
smaller — barely wide enough
to keep the buzzard of my right ear
from the doe of my left . . .

You know in America they
won't let me write like this.

The child on the highway
shoots the child in the yard.

I don't understand the night here,
the crickets' tower where the rope
won't stop swinging,
dictators, dictators everywhere:
Everything must leave me.

Because the moon is in my face the birds go blind.

AMAZON

Yellow cotton with its printed leaves
green burns around the eyes of parakeets,
my mother brings me the dress
I used to live in. I pin
its small shoulders against mine, the hem
blossoming a precise border above
my hipbones. Mother, what can the world
do with this dress if you don't know?
I spread the hand of an Amazon
over its narrow chest, folding
easily as noon shadow. The moth in my closet
has disguised herself as a brooch.
On the dim shelf, papers, a sombrero, a toy
mandolin, wait for the boat

to the next world. I cross
the sleeves of the breathless. There
with the blush of the laundered, seam of
half-flowers, the faint ozone of ectoplasm
rises — the female golem. She's afraid
of children. For after children
what next —

hand-tracings, starry schoolwork, ancient
valentines. White shoes in my palm.
I'm too enormous to live. Oh, time

is the one we can't do to
what we want to. Mother
I'll be the one.

THE FIRST HOUSE IS BURNING

1.

This is the one I would not report.

Radar picks up the heart
and spasms big white islands
across the screen
the glow

tears apart the shape
jacks itself.

It is my father's heart.
It is the eye nightmare
trapped in the planetarium
when it's closed. I want it to be

autumn when the night's
happened — somehow, while we were
inside. When we entered the building
it was daylight. Stone was daylight
and milk was daylight

a father's milk
safehouse milk
every mouth the welled-up —
the breastbone, field of volts.

2.

Outside, windows nub with darkness.

But this is the Hospital Cinema

We watch the heart charge
This is the sky

miraculous synthetic
impostor memory
this is my channel

the same bird in the same place in the same
beat: Same
breast j-j-jammed

I am shouting no in the dream's face
even as I make that face
even as I make that face
even as I make my mother
and my father

and that little self-girl
self-goblin self-angel

so sound comes off like a dust
This is the Hospital Cinema

the keep-sorrow
the aurora
the first house that burns
because we leave it on —

We have gone
and left it on —

If you want more than this,
you want.

3.

I have lived all my life as if
talking to one person
who is not there

Marina Tsvetayeva you
are not there:

Marina, I have had this dream
that is my life over
and over I have had this:

Why you?
Why me?

Child I have not had,
I am your eyes

When we are first here, first
in our mother's body
the heart must be enormous
must be the sun dying and dying
must be a rack a geologic age
a giant moth stunned on on on darkness,
we guess and —

are wrong —
Dear X,

it is autumn. Outside
my open window leaves fall suddenly
from their hallucination.
I don't hear them till the ground.

Everything is private in daylight.
Help it. Help it.

My young father,

FLOWERING ADAM

When he thought he was crazy, when he was
crazy, when he was dead, when he thought

he was dead in the earth and eaten
and corrupt, when he was swarming and

dessicated and hellholed in his sockets, old
eyeball rolled in his gullet and something

working, working under the green
pinlight of his breastbone, when

it came to this — unhinged in his body —
he rose up dry as the cicada,

he rose up by limestone, root and sod,
Adam Stinkweed, back in the black garden.

It was all char and incense.
But he had risen. He was dead

crazy as that star shook and milky
spokes walked between the grass —

He rose up Lily-of-the-Valley.
He rose up nipples in his palm,

Adam Erectus, without the sensitive
root of the living. What bird

could he scare from the field?
Where could desire thrust him then?

He could not imagine for all
the eunuchs in heaven why he

would return as the beggar of form,
a wickless candle, a gifted vegetable

parlaying dung into sweet air . . .
He would stick in the teeth of cows or

pass through the rabbit: Destiny —
what man doesn't find it in the waste

of his heart? With no eyes but blossoms
to see he was good, he blossomed

orange as the hackles of foxes, orange
as the lucifers of magma, burning

petals like wings shot and gilded
hesitations — like the crown

of the carrot above the dream's poor
writing finger, he blossomed and let go

seed to second honeymoon the soil:
flytrap, thistle, watcher-by-the-wayside,

a quince tree, blushing, and from its branches
golden death's balls hung

above the spoonbush, above the tongue bramble,
Adam Succulent, Adam rose

jacked in the fiery pulpit.

PRIMAVERA

She would have starved me out of the underworld
if she could have done it. He fed me
seeds that glistened red, he said
I needed at least that much
sustenance, reminder of earth. I needed
nothing but the hard realm of his body:
his ribs cold against my breast,
my tongue on the bones of his shoulders.
Now, dredged back, I can feel
blighted crops stir with an urge
to sprout, gnarled on the frozen ground.
And I hate this power of hers
over food and sex
she's forced on me, hate
being like her: sunflowers'
droop and wrinkle of poppies at my touch.
He's down there, watching, I know,
he must think
I belong to her inbreeding world again.
So I love to rake the fertile earth
to a compost of worms and beetles, rustle
the corn till I find a smear of slugs
on the stalks.
Just to spite her. And then feel the decayed
things burrow underneath, to the deeper
world, where they belong,
and me. Above, stunted
tufts of olive trees; iris
and lobelia, and bullocks
straining their yokes through the deep
seed-rows; I straggle
through harrowed fields, remembering
how once the earth
unclosed for me. Now
my mother, in black veils still,
wails over crocus and rose. She watches me

close as I walk from bush to bush,
suspicious,
afraid I'm not even the girl
she ravaged the earth to get back.
I think she longs for a new excuse
for her ritual mourning, the power
of withheld nourishment
it gave her. And in the starved,
bare flats of Hades, Dis
moves like her shadow, rousing
his own envious grief.
He can't stand not touching me
and he gazes through the furrows of earth
as I squeeze the orange blooms
in my fist, spit,
tear the spears of hyacinth as quick
as she makes me
make them bloom, and fill
— just for him — my mudstained
apron to overflowing
with withering stalks of lilies.

BY BREAD ALONE

1.

I scraped
the last scraps of white
from the crust
and laid them on my sister's tongue,
while the crows marked our father's
black road home.

2.

She was starving; everything was.
The horizon specked with ravens swooping
around a house in the hemlocks
that glistened with clumps of sugar, a dark
candy chimney they swarmed but left untouched.

3.

Food, and fire: duck-fat
sizzling on the coals. Vats
of chocolate spattered
the baked walls. The old woman
spooned it into our mouths, greedy

to be loved. And fed us
everything we looked at:
honeyballs and chestnut torte,
windowseals, the sugared frame of a mirror.

Gretel told her how
the oaks had shivered from our father's
axestrokes
before he left us in the woods
with only a day's worth of bread,

and how even that I'd scattered in the mud.

4.

After days of gorging
we began to call her Mama. She made us tell
how our father chugged his rum with trembling hands,
so drunk he'd choke on his soup. She swore
she'd never leave us
hungry, never
let us go. Rubies
glistened sharp and tight around her throat.

5.

Gretel never wanted
to stop eating.
She begged Mama to keep the oven full

and they kneaded
together all day as Mama
whispered stories about a little girl
with a father too weak to keep her alive,
a stepmother who hoarded the few
scraps of sweets for herself,

and a brother who'd rather feed the birds than her.

6.

They were always together. Gretel
barely spoke to me anymore
except when she came to my room

to feed me slabs of crumb-cake.

I slept all day, dreamed
of blood-stained axes, children
picking red berries

out of blackbirds' mouths.

7.

Gretel said there was nothing

worth remembering, nothing
to be afraid of anymore. Mama
nodded behind her, gaunt,
the kitchen
nauseous
with its odor of marzipan
still baking, rum-cakes
gone stale.

8.

The loaved ceilings began to crack

from the oven's heat, and burnt
sugar oozed in black
streaks along the walls.

Mama asked me why
I'd grown so quiet, why
the ladyfingers lay
untouched around my bed.

9.

Gretel was scared all over again,
I could tell:

scared I wasn't fat enough.
She begged me to eat
the lumps of fried dough, Mama was
furious over the waste,
she said, the useless

weakness.

10.

Once I woke from a nightmare, and ate
a square from the roof above my bed
and another, and another, till a branch
of hemlock broke through
and I could see the moon again, and smell
wet leaves of the black forest
and a putrid curl of smoke
from the chimney's dough.
The moonlight shone a path between the trees.

11.

Gretel wouldn't go.
She said she'd never let me
bully her back into those twisted woods,
never go anywhere near the old shack
with our drunk father, the scraps
of bread and muddy gruel.
She said I was jealous that Mama
loved her more than I knew how, gave her
everything a girl could ever need.

12.

All that was years ago. I live alone now
in the deep hollows of a hemlock
somewhere near my starving parents' house.
I never even found out if they survived.

13.

But when I hunt by day, the trails
have a way of leading me back

to the stale
house of sweets, half-eaten,

where my twin sister stares through the window,
dark eyes sunk in her bony skin, hungering

for the next lost child,
clutching his belly, to make

his way through the forest and taste
the burning ginger of the broken house.

AT THE DAYS END MOTEL

I turned on the waterworks and said
“Well you don’t need to make a Federal case out of it.”
But she did and I suppose she needed to.
Let’s get out of this hellhole, I said.
That’s a nice dog and pony show you have there, she said.
Be my guest, I said.
You’re really chewing up the scenery tonight, she said.
And you, you’re a predatory woman, one of easy morals, cheap
and tawdry.
Hey listen schmendrick, at least I’m not an inept nonentity.
Aw, Cupcake, don’t let’s get cruel now, I can’t help for stains
on the wallpaper, okay?
You’re like a rabbit responding very rapidly to food.
I confess, in a crutch and toothpick parade
I would never single you out.

Down the road, about a quarter of a mile, a tractor trailer
jack-knifed and took a stationwagon and a mini-bus with it
straight to hell where they had some remarkably good
carrot-cake.
A jackal-headed god of the underworld
joined them at their table
and was surprisingly convivial.

EVENT HORIZON IN BAR VALHALLA, NEW YORK

It rains I'm in England.
It's almost tea-time. Suddenly I love to read
and overcook vegetables.

Months pass — it snows
I'm in Russia. It seems that I've
lost all my reindeer. They wandered into the night . . .

They'll come back some day, I think, cheered on
by the sight of a diner I'm in Montana
now in some kind of relation with the pending sky . . .

And it's endless — your face, for instance,
reminds me of the Dallas Public Library
when it's closed.

Don't be offended: I like it best
then, when it's closed, those dark windows
and potted plants, all those words

by themselves, performing, captive,
trees falling down in books,
stars falling down, Venus on a half-shell, rising . . .

But like I was saying (Could I have another one?)
all things are revelations
of betrayal: a cigarette machine

becomes a sunrise in El Paso
as you unhinge yourself
from room to room, year to year,

nail to nail, walls change to scenes
of Pompeii, of ruins
unstopped each moment in the deep blue —

so that the orange extinguish of daylight
is a prayer in a rain-lit cathedral
that plays on a tape-recorder which

I just happen to have
if you've got a moment, while I
unload this bag of statues —

THE LABORATORY

They were turning animals into people. The bull is almost a man. But they can't get the horns off its head. Someone forgot to remove the nose ring, and now it's too late.

The dog-boy still has a tail, and keeps lifting his leg.

The goat-man is simply a reversed satyr, a goat with the legs of a man.

The turtle-girl's head slips into her neck as she murmurs mama, mama . . .

The man who was once a horse looks like something the Greeks thought of.

The whale has a huge cork in the top of his head disguised to look like a fedora.

The parrot-woman, as if in a trance, keeps repeating, Polly wants a cracker.

The converted bat claims he's Bela Lugosi, and would look very fondly on a cup of freshly drawn blood.

The butterfly changed into a woman claims to be Madame Butterfly.

The cow-woman needs milking.

The elephant wants to run amok, but is just an old man with a broken tusk.

Spider-woman sits at a spinning wheel.

Fly-man is on the wall creating flyspecks to great applause.

The scientists are pleased. But charity begins at home. Now they want to see if they can turn themselves into animals. One suggests a mosquito. Another is hoping for a goldfish. One scientist declares his lifelong desire to be a lobster. Another hopes for an amoeba . . .

THE SQUARE WHEEL

A mad scientist has cloned himself. It was an accident. He had been trying to invent a square wheel when all of a sudden there was another mad scientist trying to invent a square wheel.

Theory: If the circle can be squared, why not the wheel?

Meanwhile the first mad scientist is beginning to feel redundant. He might have to share his wife, or even the Nobel prize. Or, more importantly, his toothbrush.

The other mad scientist says, don't blame me, dad, I didn't ask to be born, I'm just here trying to invent a square wheel.

But, as it's always getting to be too late, the clone trying to invent a square wheel has already cloned another mad scientist trying to invent a square wheel, who accidentally clones another mad scientist madly seeking the square wheel . . .

The wild boy of Aveyron who drinks his cool water from a cup, cries an unnamable weight. The water may be sweet but it stands for something to him now; he doesn't taste this drink. And I may not love any thing or one, but I might love, as once he swallowed before he was apart.

"Cicadas sizzle in the trees beyond the hum of screens. You promise yourself rain. You say, 'Certainly it will happen; it isn't up to me.' You plead,

'Keep tunnelling. Into the granite and powder, into the greasy clay; persist; I will pay you back, I promise.' But you aren't sure you can afford it, and you wish it were true — what you thought as a kid — that if you covered your eyes, you'd be invisible.

A bat's shadow flutters, circles the dim square ceiling. You know your mama said she caught fireflies when she was a girl, not too far from here, near Kansas City. She hoped you'd see them. You want, tonight, to see them.

Sure. You think anything can get past me?"

Of a heavy butterfly, disproportionately large, grey in a grey magnolia tree beyond a room-sized, cloudy, plate-glass window. Thick, burdened flapping in the leathery leaves.

Of a woman who came toward me in the dark and showed me her body and was hurt when I refused to play. When I pitied her, her face turned into a Balinese mask all teeth and evil. My body.

Of watching from the oceanfront a fire on an island where cancer was being made in the basement. Foam on the waves black with ash.

Of a tidal marsh in the moonlight, of flying inches above silver water and silt bars, through the stillness among great blue herons and snowy egrets wise by cruel.

Of sinking in skin in a closed place. Of all parts laid out in order and ready.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES WRIGHT

Matthew Cooperman: How has Laguna Beach been altered in your imagination after those catastrophic fires? You said about Oakland after the fires, quoting Gertrude Stein, "There's no there there." Does Laguna Beach feel that way?

Charles Wright: Nothing is ever altered in the imagination or in the memory of that imagination. Once it's grooved in, it's grooved in forever. You may be different each time you revisit it — and, indeed, probably are — but it isn't. Laguna is as unchanged as Kingsport or Verona or Hiwassee Dam. As a matter of fact, it's probably more clarified and bulks larger by being restructured and partly disappeared. What isn't visible is usually larger in the imagination than what you can put your hands on, naturally. And if there is no there there, it is more here here — the more violently it vanishes, the deeper it devolves into its real place, back-lit and etched in the memory. Imagination is the great retriever, after all, memory's dog.

MC: You taught at Irvine for seventeen years and returned to the south in 1983. Is the notion of exile — imaginative exile — a force behind some of the longing for identity and place? And is your return to a more familiar terrain responsible in part for the greater foregrounding of literal place and people in your later work?

CW: All poetry is written from an exiled point of view. Otherwise, why waste the time if you've never left or already arrived? And since most of us are only travelling through, it seems necessary that the imagination have a tactile place it can not only cotton to but identify with and rent a room in. Thus when we write home, we know where we stand.

Actually, the return to the south — which I assume you're talking about — and in fact, to Virginia *is* responsible for, as you say, a more literal foregrounding (to use the jargon) of place in my more recent stuff. I presume you're talking about the "Journals" here, because that's what I'm talking about. The mnemonic

glow was gone. I thought it was time to try a bit of actuality, and so I got the idea of the journal form, something quite immediate and aortal, more open to the tactile emotions (if that's possible) and the tactile landscape. What was, so to speak, under my feet and on my mind. That went on for five years, from 1983-1988. Once I got back here after the 27 years away, I have never once written about the landscape of my youth — never once. It has always been of the present moment. I don't know what that means, but someone must.

MC: And the foregrounding of people?

CW: That came about because of a review I got once, the only time, I think, that a review has been generative. Helen Vendler said there were no people in my poems, and I rather liked it that way. But there it was in print, *no people*, so I decided to put some in. I did it mostly in *The Other Side of the River*, as people seem to go best with overt narrative, and I was trying a bit of that too. Then I felt I had done it, for better or worse, and went back to where I had been before. I'm not really a people person. I'm more of a landscape person. People are mostly, for me, merely foreground for what's really going on, always behind them.

MC: In a recent interview (*Paris Review* #113, Winter 1989) you said, in talking about the twin influences of Pound and Italy on your work, something like, "If form imposes and structure allows, then Pound imposed and Italy allowed." Could you talk about those influences as they have played out in your career?

CW: Reading Pound without interference was both a good and a risky thing. Since I had no instruction or history about either him, his work, or poetry in general, I really understood very little of what he was talking about. Again, both a good and a risky thing. The main thing I did learn from reading the Cantos and earlier poems, without having to be told, was that there was an obvious formal component to all this and that I had better pay attention to it. When I later found his prose writings, he instructed in no un-

certain terms that this business of poetry is a craft that takes long in the learning, and that there are no short cuts to the Muses. Form, the “making,” orders and controls. The road forks and there are only two choices, form and chaos. The one is long and uphill, the other is short and an easy slide. Form is the imposition that sets you free. Pound imposed these ideas in the unmarked, fresh mud of my beginnings and they have hardened over the years.

The “idea” of Italy, meanwhile, allowed me free access to my imagination. The idea of a culture where art and writing and music were everyday things and occurrences — or so I thought — somehow not only permitted me to try my hand, but also sort of forced that hand as well. I have always felt that starting out in Italy allowed me to think globally while acting locally. It allowed me a freedom for the extended gesture if I wanted it. And eventually I did want it. Pound and Italy were a kind of concurrence of planets, as it were, that lit up my sky and showed me How and What. One is appreciative, to say the least, for such an horizon event.

MC: I’m interested in your relationship to what Hyatt Waggoner has called the American Visionary line of Crane and Roethke. Is there a connection there and how has it evolved in your work?

CW: Roethke doesn’t really interest me much until his last book, *The Far Field*. And what interests me there is, of course, “North American Sequence,” still an unacknowledged American masterpiece. I am, or was when I first read them some 30 years ago, much taken by their long lines, the sumptuous rhythms and undulations, and their subject matter. I can’t imagine that these things haven’t found their way, in some manner, into my own work. I like how he talks about the invisible world as well as the visible one. I admire his previous work, his more traditionally formal poems, but I am moved and persuaded by these last identifications with the animate and inanimate denizens of the landscape. What he thinks is important is what I think is important. I feel a kinship with these six poems, unlike any other contempo-

rary poems I know. They are, you might say, singing my song, and I hear it.

Crane is another matter, more of an admiration, an iconographic desire. *The Bridge* is the Big Enchilada that you've got to try and reconstruct in your own manner. It is the American Gesture. The poem has some of the most beautiful language and music in our poetry. *White Buildings* is incandescent in many of its windows. Crane's "logic of metaphor" is not always logical, of course, which is its seduction. Directness of meaning, accessibility, has never been the major aim of poetry and/or poetic form. Other felicities very often predominate in the first pressing. Meaning can come more strongly in the second or third. Wine is fine, to continue the image, but grappa's the whapper. Crane is the mountain, Roethke the valley; each comes out of the other in my landscape.

MC: You quote Auden in *Half-life* as saying "Truth is Catholic, but the search for it is Protestant." How is that so, and how is that alive in your poetry?

CW: Well, I suppose you could say that the Catholic Church is the descendent and heir of the original church, the only and first church, therefore if there is a truth to be found, such a truth would reside there, and not in its tributaries. Being Protestant, one would always stand in the tributarial position and, if one were trying to get back to the original source, the truth, one would always be attempting to go back upstream, against the current, mapping the length of the tributary to its source. So the search is Protestant, since the source just *is*. But that's not how he means it, surely. Surely he meant something more metaphoric, being the good Anglican that he was, a major tributary if there ever was one. And being good Anglicans, metaphorically, we all have to work hard to find the truth, I suppose, which is there for the knowing if you pursue it diligently enough in the right place. The search is, I hope, alive in my work the same way it is alive in my life — the bell that calls me from over the mountain. And un-

like Mallory's mountain, some of us climb this one because it's not there.

MC: Your numerous comments about your "failed" Episcopalian upbringing are similarly intriguing. Could you discuss your search for the sacred? Was that failure of a traditional belief system the beginning of another and does it hinge on doubt? How has that shaped you?

CW: I don't really know, even yet, how that has played out. I don't know whether, since I was cut off from one belief system (self-cut, I might add), it led me to pursue my own version so avidly in my writing, as though I were trying to explain and justify my early action to the people who were so intent on my remaining faithful to the original (i.e., the church) — my mother, Mrs. Perry at Sky Valley, Father Webster at Christ School —, or whether it's just in my nature to do what I do. I suspect it's some combination of the two. Also, I've forgotten my upbringing almost entirely by now, and it might be that I'm merely seeking refuge in my writing from the vicissitudes of human relationships the way others seek equal refuge in the church. Of course, I don't think so, but you never know — the get-thee-to-a-nunnery syndrome. In my case, a verbal monastery. Whatever, the search for the sacred does continue. It is the unicorn with the golden horn, and makes most other searches seem lightweight and worthless.

You mentioned doubt. Everything hinges on doubt. Without a beginning in doubt, there is no faith. Thomas is the main man here. Without Original Doubt there is no future acceptance. As far as another belief system, it's the same system, just a different code. And as any old intelligence agent will tell you, nothing matters but the codes. Cryptography is all. You get the right code, you discover the secret.

And how has doubt shaped me? The way the Pacific wind shapes the Pacific cypress, the Monterey Cypress — to its own will and its own desires. Both of which, of course, are blind.

MC: The idea of journey, both in and out of the body, and in and

out of the autobiographical self, is a persistent theme in your work. I'm thinking of all the work, really, but particularly *Bloodlines* and *China Trace*, the "Pilgrim's walking to and fro." This journey, and the "pilgrim's progress" if you will, seems a primary concern, and one integrally woven up with the sacramental urgency in the work. What is the importance of this "journey" and how does it operate in your poems?

CW: The importance of it is just what you have said in the question, and in the last question too, if I remember it rightly. It has to do with where the journey goes, and how it works. It goes in and out of the body, it goes in and out of the autobiographical self (or, at least, the putative autobiographical self). It involves a transubstantiation of things, people, and places as well as of a metric. Which is to say that the formal conditions are transubstantiations of the content, the content being what it all means, somehow. The formal elements are a reconfiguration of the moral values inherent in meaning. The ultimate importance of the journey is the same as it was in the search in the previous question. The journey itself naturally has interests and adventures — adventures in language, adventures in subject matter, adventures in meaning — all along the way. But the end of the journey is what is important. The tracks of the unicorn are exciting, a glimpse of the glitter of the horn is exciting, but they are both second best. Best is the breath of the unicorn on your own face. The journey is, in one way, the path along the river of blood, as Dante had it in the *Inferno*. It's also up the river of light, as he also had it in the *Paradiso*, where one hopes to wade one day, upriver, undeterred. As far as my poems go, it is the road, it is the undernarrative, the *sottonarrativa*, that runs under the entire overlay of my work, the one unvarying direction that holds the parts and stations together. It takes me where I have to go.

MC: The sense of the long poem is curiously immanent in your work. By curious I mean the level of accretion, from poem to poem, book to book, collected volume to collected volume, as if "the journey of the poet" was irreconcilable to an ending. And yet

you manage to do that in books that change radically in form and structure, and almost entirely within a lyric framework. As sustained work, that seems unusual. Could you discuss that?

CW: Well, not irreconcilable to any ending. "An" ending, perhaps. But "the" ending, certainly not. As I've been saying, "the" ending is where it is headed for. That end, as in any pilgrimage, is, of course, death, and I do expect to arrive. What I'll have to say on the subject remains to be seen. Or heard, as the case may be. Then, someone else would have to know the code, and that's, as they say, unlikely. Globed Fruit City, no doubt.

Writing two extended, interlocking, interdependent works has been my obsession and task for about twenty years, from the early 1970 to the late 1980s. And since a lyric framework was all I knew, and all I was capable of, given my inclination toward, and dependence upon, submerged narrative, I was forced to work within those constrictions. Or to make such constrictions elastic enough to keep me between the ditches and at the same time extend the road indefinitely. The challenge was to sustain disparate books individually and collectively at the same time. The structure of *Country Music*, the trilogy headed upward, was one way. The other, in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, came into play when the idea of the Journals took over. That idea was retroactive structurally, as it happened, and pulled the first two books, *The Southern Cross* and *The Other Side of the River*, along with it and gave them, in retrospect, "journal" status as well, even though their movements are generally otherwise. I find the journal format, at least as I've tried to use it, and reinvent it, that strong. Perhaps it has something to do with the shared lineation movement in the first two books and the second two. Perhaps it's the discontinuous structure of the individual poems, held together by that *strada sottonarrativa*, the undernarrative road they are all traveling over, both literally and figuratively. The journey holds us together. The destination sustains us.

I hope, in any case, that the designation "extended work" is accurate. I have worked on the books with that in mind. The projects evolved on two levels, actually. One was subject matter,

which we've been talking about for some time now in the other questions, and the form the subject matter took. The other level was more visible and audible. I tried to make the poems as condensed and compact as possible in *Country Music*, from prose at the beginning to an almost elliptical condensation in *China Trace*. Then, having squeezed the visible form into a ball, as it were, I tried to unwind it and stretch it back out in the direction of prose, conversational, at the end taking a prose convention, the journal, as a framework, but working within it in poetry, a poetic line, to keep it shy of prose. The substructure, the subject matter, continued to be what it had been in *Country Music*, but with different clothes on. The content was unchanged. It was still the same road. In *Country Music* it went up the mountain. In *10,000 Things* it goes down the valley.

MC: I am fascinated and deeply moved by your sense of "communion with the dead," particularly in *The Southern Cross* and *The Other Side of the River*. These personages strike me as both specific and generalized, personal memories and a numinous beyond, a way of seeing, but also a way of remembering. Would you say that is accurate?

CW: I would say this is accurate, yes. When I talk to Giacomo Leopardi, for example, it's more of a way of paying tribute to him as a writer, and what his writings have meant to me. Not too much feedback, either, as you might expect. I suppose there is some sense of retrieval going on in other cases, dredging the waters of memory, as it were, for those I once actually knew, as opposed to someone whom I only admired but never knew. But poetry has always been, on one level, a communion with the dead, hasn't it? One often writes to impress them, to sing to them, to let them know you're around, if nothing else. Besides, as I said once before, they've got all the answers, don't they? Poetry so often rises out of previous poetry, rather like new vegetation out of old vegetation, enriched and informed by what's dead. So in that way, we're always in a constant communion, eucharistically, with the dead.

MC: Could you discuss the evolution of your line through the years?

CW: There hasn't been much of an "evolution," actually, it's just gotten longer. Its tensility has been stretched, rather than compacted, though I like to think it's just as strong, though in a different way and to a different purpose. The first time I ever had any "sense" of a line as a line was when I started writing syllabics about thirty years ago, in 1963. It was the first time I had ever felt comfortable in lineation, and was doing something I felt was compatible to the way I thought, or felt I thought. I am still using a line that is syllabically based. It's true I try to manipulate the stress patterns within this syllabic framework, but the overriding urge and discipline is syllable count, almost always in odd numbers, anywhere from 3 to, say, 21 in a line. I count every syllable, every time, in every line I write. I suppose it's an evolution of sorts to go from a patter, an even patter of syllabic lines to an uneven series of syllabic lines. If so, my line has evolved. If not, not. As I say, it's just gotten longer, a kind of half-free verse, I suppose.

MC: As your poems have become more discursive they've also become more transparent in terms of the writer's "being seen." Particularly in *Zone Journals* the personal moves to the forefront. As the barrier between prose and poetry begins to dissolve, the distinction between the highly crafted poem and the private journal dissolves too. Perhaps it was an inevitability once you began "unraveling the spider's web" from *China Trace*. What has been behind that evolution?

CW: The form itself, I suppose, more than anything else. The taking of a prose "attitude" (the idea of a journal that was not merely diaristic) to perform a poetic function. The taking of a prose genre to promote and enhance a poetic occasion. The taking on of a prose way of speaking to engender and personify a poetic "voice." The taking on of a prose structure in order to restructure the poem. I'm not really sure that barriers dissolve, but repositionings become possible, openings become possible. One feels, in a way,

more available to one's emotions, somehow, with this traditionally "tell-it-like-it-is" structure which the journal affords. At the same time, one — at least I do — feels even more obligated than ever to keep the poetic virtues strongly in hand, so that one is working as tightly as possible in a more open venue. In my case, my longtime ambition to be Emily Dickinson on Walt Whitman's open road, kinetic compression within a more open-ended space. The poetic charge remains the same, but the emotional quotient is altered a bit and placed in the foreground a bit more. Even though the journal poems are different in conception and even in structure, they can't be different in execution or in formal values. They are always poems and arrive always with that attendant obligation. They just have a lot more on their mind, and feel freer to speak that mind.

MC: If the journals allow for a more conversational, open format, the way they are composed would seem to require a different technique also. For instance composition by line versus composition by stanza.

CW: Composition by line has always been my game. Always. Except when I wrote the few prose poems I've done, and then it was sentence by sentence. There are writers who compose their lined poems sentence by sentence. Such poems have a prosey ring to my ear. Hopkins scanned from stanza to stanza, though I suspect he composed linearly. Williams said the stanza, not the line, was his unit of measure. But that was part, as I recall, of the variable foot project, so I can't be quite convinced. I suppose if you are writing surface narrative, it's easier to compose by sentences and, to extend that, by paragraphs. At least I would imagine the temptation to do so would be great. Since my sense of narrative is subterranean, the line works best for me, a series of building blocks, or strokes, or layers that tend to accrue rather than be directed.

MC: How do you compose nowadays? Is there a routine, both to the original inspiration, what it produces, and the final form, revision?

CW: I seem to revise as I go, line by line, getting the line right before I go on to the next one. I never, it seems, finish a poem and then go back and revise. Composition and revision go on simultaneously. Odd. Lineation. I build them line by line until they are free-standing.

MC: Your work has often been called "painterly" and indeed, your avowed love of Cézanne and Morandi, among others, supports that. I like your comment on Matisse too, it's not "how you put it together, but how you keep it apart." Could you talk about that?

CW: There is a kind of spatial negation, a visual power in absence that painters understand and employ, and which I'm interested in poetically. It's a sort of white hole that has a kinetic draw to it that the lines of the poem float on and resist. Part of my interest in the dropped line is that it sets up a bit of this power field within the line itself; a rhythmic jolt sometimes might appear, small as it is, that kicks the line and the poem along, keeping it alive over the top of a force that would founder and sink it at any time. But everybody knows this. You keep the composition apart just a little to let this energy in and out, and to let the poem in and out of the energy generated by this emptiness. It's all about the same thing, the power and domination of what's not there, the energy of absence.

POST SCRIPT

Saying things over and over sapped them of meaning and
color —

rocks, water, windows, the man with the old suitcase
outside the customshouse waiting, the big clock
striking eight p.m. and the boat nowhere in sight,
though its whistle already blew. Out on the pier,
the great crane rose among empty panniers like a cross.
Later, the stars came out over the slow, somnolent barges
and there, in the deserted plaza, at the foot of the heroes'
memorial,
the four sailors deposited the body of the drowned diver.

Karlóvasi, 7-22-87

PAINTING STONES

To paint on stones — quiet, forgotten, taking
their mute dictation. Look: a young girl,
all innocence and beauty, her breasts bare. Her eyes
luminous with your own sorrow: that you never loved her.
And over here: the classical ephebe, his curls tied back
with a ribbon,
his profile flawless. A discus-thrower, most likely,
and musician. But there was no room on the stone
to show the lyre, where it rested on his knee.
Late at night, however, long past midnight, you hear
that invisible lyre, playing something wonderful,
a poem you'll never write, while the ambulances
scream down your street transporting the 78 victims.

Karlóvasi, 8-29-87

GARDEN IN AUTUMN

They weren't waiting for anything, just sitting quietly
in the garden, their straw chairs soaking up the dampness
(already the first chill was in the air). They looked out at
the sea, the clouds, the hills, the old tanneries
long abandoned and half in ruins, like ancient temples.
Nearby, two yellow hens pecked at black watermelon seeds.
Off behind the cypresses, the fruit peddler cried
the last grapes; a boat's whistle blew in the distance.
The three old men looked at each other and slowly
nodded their heads, because they knew
it wasn't blowing for them. They had already left.

Karlóvasi, 8-15-87

PEOPLE AND SUITCASES

Don't leave your wet towel on the table.
It's time to start straightening up.
In a month or so, another summer will be over.
What a sad demobilization, putting away bathing suits,
sunglasses, short-sleeves, sandals,
twilight colors on a luminous sea. Soon,
the outdoor cinemas will be closed, their chairs
stacked in a corner. The boats will sail
less often. Safely back home, the lovely tourist girls
will sit up late, shuffling through color glossies
of swimmers, fishermen, oarsmen — not us. Already,
up in the loft, our suitcases wait to find out
when we'll be leaving, where we're going this time,
and for how long. You also know that inside
those scuffed, hollow suitcases there's a bit of string,
a couple of rubber bands, and not a single flag.

Karlóvasi, 7-26-87

NOT QUITE

Through the open door, you see them:
two women — mother and daughter? — in black kerchiefs,
seated side by side on an old sofa. They don't move or
talk.

A loaf of bread sits on the table in front of them.

A cat sleeps in the chair. Outdoors, the bay glitters,
the cicadas screech, scores of swallows write something
on the air — something finished yet incomplete.

But before I can say exactly what I mean,
the old woman gets up and shuts the door.

Karlóvasi, 7-25-87

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

He leaves sleep behind, and the road the moon paves
with thin gold leaf. He's on his own now,
here, in this little, this next-to-nothing,
with a walking stick and an empty basket. He sees
mountains, hovering in the mist. His loneliness
is weightless now, he could almost fly. But no.
He sits in a chair. Picks up an apple. Bites into it.
At last, he can read his proper name — in the teethmarks.

Karlóvasi, 8-27-87

CLOSING WORDS

The unhappy girl gnaws at her collar.
So long ago. Our mothers are dead.
A hen cackles in the rubble.
We had no answers. Later,
we stopped asking. Night was falling,
wind blowing. A straw hat tumbled
out of the stands of the empty Stadium. Below,
in the river,
watersnakes and turtles roamed at will.
And maybe this would serve as closure
for a story already remote from us, strange.

Karlóvasi, 7-6-87

translated by Martin McKinsey

HERM WYKEN TO HIMSELF

Spring is no longer a verb for how we get up
out of chairs to answer the door. Spring we don't.
Spring whistles aren't birds, they're electric squeals
from the turned-up volume of green out the window,

and red gets into our dreams three times
as *stop* or bloody or rotating lights
for every time it is coals on a windy beach
or a woman's dress or valleys of shining apples.

The phone rings less. Letters are shakey and few.
This walk to friendly coffee gets longer; right now
it halts to remember again (third time this week)
that Bert closed the coffee shop down. Keep going:

With slower steps there's more than ever to see.
No fences: the milkman wades through snow to where
your mom hangs sheets with bluing in them, and now
it's autumn snap right through the hot metal stink

of traffic near the graveyard where she is.
Forget the coffee, you'd have to drive to the Mall,
where nobody's there by the hundreds. Remember,
getting home, turn north where the butcher was,

skinny old what's-his-name. No one around
knows half the world of this walk! So now Hermie
boy, you can start that picture again in your head
from yesterday — the graceful couple

raisin-wrinkling among us (one of them you)
shy again as they slowly undress in the dark.

YOUNG MAN AT THE LAUNDROMAT, WATCHING THE SPINNING DRYERS

Look into number 6. A blown scarf makes bird-flocks
that weave through wind, it splits the seams of light.
Tatted blue jay swatches fly with parrot greens
and dartings of yellow finch. A swish and they scatter,
haunted off by a bed sheet that drifts like snow,
then lifts up and back to dark when everything stumble-dries
forward again, flying head-over-dells and hill-
over-bells, flying almost out of the loom.
The young woman, reading *Glamour*, likes candlelight suppers.
I read her life by glances. Her napkins say felicity,
say grace. At the flight of a red bra I look down at my shoes,

Or else at dryer 4. It is pummeling
serious work clothes black and blue.
This man is order and edge, homespun as the name
hammered onto the pockets: *Duke*. Nothing
here can shimmer, even the towels are beige
as mortar. I look for a leap of frivolous zags
or zigs on a shirt, for light green as slight as a child
or a wisp or whistle of pink. There ought to be
at least an emblazoned T-shirt reminder to him
of a crazy Chicago weekend with too much beer.
The only relief is the red shout of a hunter's sleeve.

I am folding. 6 and 4 are long gone home. Nearby
the streetlights diminish the beating stars.
Only dryer 3 is pulling me in, and she is away.
I imagine her off at the market filling a basket
with fruit, everything round. I color her
ripe olive black, then hack a steamy, twisting path
through waving lemongrass. I ease my basket down
to the river, down to the river, find her there
in sunlight, out on the rocks, and now we two are silent
villagers waving a far hello along the river,
each of us pounding, pounding our underclothes on rocks.

WASHING YARN TEMPLE*

State plots against state
intrigues come thick and fast

but here at Washing Yarn Temple
Xi Shi offers us harmony

a pair of faces can beam
just from turning to glimpse her

while thousands of seasoned troops
ground their weapons and surrender

Fan Li achieved his greatness
by turning away from the world

while Wu Xu had to die
in order to wear down the government

the great river may confer a name
upon a place like Zhu-ji

but this blue mountain has long been known
as a beautiful woman's birthplace.

**A temple dedicated to the memory of the great
beauty, Xi Shi, 5th Century B.C.*

MELANCHOLY THOUGHTS

Leaves falling one by one
and rain at dusk is tender

vermilion silk, playing alone
sound of a clear voice singing

try to ignore your regret
at having no friend or lover

try to build up your character
and cast your bitterness into the sea

sound of a carriage outside the door
come for some venerable elder

heaps of Taoist books
scattered in front of the pillow

ordinary people
eventually go to heaven

green water and blue hills
already here and gone.

SELLING THE LAST PEONIES

Facing the wind makes us sigh
we know how many flowers fall

spring has come back again
and where have the fragrant longings gone?

who can afford these peonies?
their price is much too high

their arrogant aroma
intimidates the butterflies

flowers so deeply red
they must have been grown in a palace

leaves so darkly green
dust scarcely dares to settle there

if you wait till they're transplanted
to the Imperial gardens

then you, young lords, will find
you have no means to buy them.

LOVE LETTER TO LI ZI-AN

I suck melting ice and munch cork bark
and still make no sense of my life

Jin-shui River and Hu-guan Pass
keep coming up in my dreams

Qin Jing's mirror is ready to break
and I'm sad for the falling magpies

Shun Qin's zither is tuned
and I blame the messenger swans

paulownia leaves by the well
cry in the autumn rain

the silver lamp by the window
dims in the wind at dawn

I write you letters across great distances
and never know if they reach you

holding a bamboo pole at sunset
next to a wide blue river.

VISITING MASTER ZHAO AND NOT FINDING HIM

I wanted to be with someone
of spiritual refinement

I find his house is empty,
only the maid is home

his crucible's still warm
from cooking up herb medicines

outside in the courtyard
tea-leaves are still simmering

a few dim lamps
next to the painted walls

a long shadow by the signal pole
that faces the setting sun

as I leave I keep turning around
hoping to find he's come back —

just a few blooming branches
brushing the outside walls.

TRIBUTE TO A MASTER ALCHEMIST

The gorgeous colored clouds
stitched up as quilted robes

wonderful perfume coming
from a finely woven tapestry

the red hibiscus blooming
among its thick green leaves

mountains and water dressed
in a rare embroidered cape

— like stopping short in your tracks
to hear the song of a warbler

or freeing a crane from a cage
to watch it fly away

— like sleep on a spring night
in an old high-ceilinged chamber

or rain that arrives at dusk
falling thick and fast.

SENT TO SECRETARY LIU

I know you used to command
an army of crack troops

marching them down new roads
as they chanted favorite ballads

forded Fen-Chuan river
in hard March rains

stood by Jin-Shui river in June
as flowers bloomed all around

but the vast sky gets locked away
behind its prison bars

and weapons of war, over time,
acquire a coat of dust —

now the scholar and the monk
can sit up late, admiring midnight

and visitors can linger
drunk and flushed on the lawn

the writing brush and inkstone
almost compose on their own

as poetry books form a circle
around the thoughtful self

and a modest talent for verse
begins to come to the surface

the way the orange carp rise
when you scatter food on their pond.

translated by David Young, with Jiann L. Lin

THE ENGULFED CATHEDRAL

I embarked with the others
In steady rain and for two hours
Saw nothing but stakes
Leaning out of the water.

Then from our black casements
We saw we were gliding under
High houses, stone piers,
An embankment of stairs.

The echo of the oars
Told us we were under a bridge.
In a moment the boatman said
We had landed at the Hotel.

Here, baroque mirrors
Showed us they'd belonged
To people in a better age,
Who also needed rest.

Dawn. Lighter rain.
Through the robes of curtains,
The call of seabirds
Combing the near distance.

A balcony shallow as a windowbox.
And out there what looked like
Hulls of keeled-over ships,
Huge ribs of pale grey metal.

They'd been abandoned:
A lace of barnacles had formed
Along the waterline.
The hulls were five great domes.

Monocular, orotund, all
Streaked with droppings.
The largest bald; upon the lesser,
A host of kittiwakes.

Trash rinsing round them —
And, beyond, the invisible
Lagoon where the ferries throb
And platforms are lost.

PAGAN MYSTERIES OF THE RENAISSANCE

Every summer there is something too much.
This week, as August draws off in a green surf,
There are too many young rabbits on the lawn.

Two or three at a time, till a jay comes down
And scares them. A lawnmower two lawns away
Tosses its foam of noise through the air.

Here, spinaches must be guarded. The yard
Becomes a park where statues of rabbits,
Of fawns and their mothers, of fat robins,

Pose briefly if we turn around,
And the radish-top flourishes,
Knotted to earth by a slender heart.

Only in the fieldglasses do the statues
Come near: wing-flashes of the finch
Seized into bloom, shuddering.

Even when it pauses the wind is still moving
The silk out of open pods,
A glade of spinaches bitten to their nub.

THE SPACES BETWEEN BIRDS

Sick of parental art — “poets have messy houses” —
my daughter assembled an utterly

clean craft, taking all her
favorite vocals and splicing

the scores of pauses singers need
to draw in air for the next phrase,

editing these on a mudslide of a tape
without an electron

of melody until

each outcry had been hushed
to accent

the continuous _____ she wished to save,
a trail of corroboration:

“I breathe, therefore it’s in me to sing again.”
And it sounds like

huh
ah
hhh
www
- - -
- - - - -
^ ^ ^
j !

So many things the gasps were not —
not geisha fan flirtations, not uvulations like the gills of fish,

not rings of breathing as in yoga.

They were huffier,
and the sound was an opera

of surmised last words,
Brahms' frustrated false teeth falling —

a sigh and a growl, expulsion
of wisdom

from a sublime
life in music to the secrecies

of rests. Perhaps she could do

the same with hawks or owls.
Or, for grandeur, as a final symphonic movement,

the last few living lions between roars.
And none of her own _____ was on the tape.

One only hears ragged inspiration
welcomed in

and in
and in,

everybody gasping in strong wind,
with no release.

I believe

if we all agreed
to follow each other

in a migratory V,
almost as if because we shaped it with our wings it could be

pronounced in the sky,
we would learn to hear the blankness

that forms the essence of our going on,
some puff we didn't

mean to say but which
means *us*.

"I believe in God,"
she says, censoring

all fallible lyrics of anyone's beliefs.

IMAGES

The town was small to the feet, small around one's body.
The young woman, our acquaintance, had shaved her head
unexpectedly — she sat bald in the most popular restaurant.
My child said hello, memorized the image. Didn't
look long. She was not embarrassed by the change.
This was the first time she had seen such a thing.

My girl *was* ashamed of my silly theatrical wig.
For no reason she could see, I was playing with an image
that should have been mere costume, limited
to masquerade, to drama, or strictly to backstage.
I should not be lunching in the most popular restaurant
in the small town with her, my likeness.

The hair was not from my own body, it wasn't from anyone's.
Leaning away, she wouldn't look me in the eye.
But very little embarrasses my daughter now
except looking pretty. Seeming womanly.
Her hair is cropped like stalwart seaweed on a rock.
It means she wants to have a workable image, a look of work.

She doesn't mind looking different:
She rides a wheelchair around the city streets —
almost all her friends use wheelchairs.
Once, she stepped out of hers, picked me up off the ground,
in a hug, the way an athlete in practice will wrestle
a skidding dummy. Yes, she can walk.

No one around us noticed. "They must be artists," she said.
To them, it seemed perhaps representative of her,
that two-sided image, first piloting the wheelchair,
spinning the steering rims, then lifting, looking proud,
carrying me about on foot. Both actions made physical,
made compulsory, by the texture and propulsion

of an image within herself, by intimacy with others'
marvels of heads and bodies, to whom she gave,
in effect, residence within herself.

POEM FOR MY FIFTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY

The boat has been upside down for
the last five blooms
of hydrangeas that harbor it.

The boat is a stranger's boat,
stranger's hydrangea.

The boat does not grow
but it grows as its slivers
pull apart, pull discrete
as if for better view of one another.

The purpose of the boat
is now out of the hands
of navigators.
Fish

no longer see its shadow.
Oar? Motor? —
just the savor

of the grass,
and a tendency to drift.

Some ship!
Shallow as it is,
isn't there still draft to deepen in?

Out from under the bow
a cat —

who knows
how long it had been cagey, watching —
a cat comes into the open,

high tail, one candle.

AT A BOAT BURNING

Portavogie, October 1993

Families have come from miles around to teeter on the very rim of the harbour wall. They remind me of the drowned fishermen in a story I was told by a schoolfriend from these parts: how water in their waders will drag them down, but keep them upright on the seabed like a stand of oilskinned kelp. And of how nowadays submarines outnumber mackerel. A sub in its nets will drag one of these boats backwards for miles, or down to where the *Antares* and her crew lie in the silt like a macabre aquarium trinket. The way these people crane their necks, you'd think they were trying to peer right down out into the Irish Sea where their lost fathers and brothers sway. For when there's no option, ceremony comes into its own torchlit and cathartic kingdom, its realm of Hallowe'en disguises, Twelfth regalia, Viking ship-burials, and now this lit rag tossed into the petrol-soaked hold. Within seconds the belly of the loved, named vessel is snapping and growling. Then it explodes bloodily through the cage of its timbers. Sparks shoal upward on a tide of hugely-amplified radio static, or drift like inflamed plankton through the lurid currents of smoke. From deep inside the unfathomable nest of heat, what sound like gunshots crack and pop. Firebrands, unidentifiable things, fall sputtering into the shallows, and swap the camouflage of flame for a pelt of anonymous char. Soon the whole charred thing will slump onto its keel and sink into the scurf of ash at its bows, or be towed out for the sea to close the red eye of its embers with a far-off, volcanic hiss. But for now, this floating bonfire is all there is, its hot breath on the children's faces, its appetite and smithereens, the banner of its smouldering oil that the waves unfurl and furl.

WHITES

Two old ladies, someone's second cousins,
shift uneasily from tongue to tongue.

It is like eating breakfast in Babel, only
this is Paris, and luncheon is served.

"Exile is a buffet of cold cuts, leftovers."

One of them twitters on about the Tsarevich
and his dangerous nosebleeds. The other
ransacks a cabinet full of bone china
(*"Not two pieces left from the one set . . ."*)
and brings to the table an eight-inch box

like a demonstration coffin, or the case
for the last bottle of some priceless wine.

"Polished maple lined with quilted satin."

They chirp its history in French, Russian
and English: that it survives is miraculous,

that it survives unshrivelled is sure proof

(*"To think that mad boy would cut this off . . ."*)

of sainthood. Think what it has seen,
this hand's-length of fleshy contraband,
think what it has been through. . . .

"Rasputin's . . . thing. To have it in our home."

The sisters coo and cluck, two reverent
hens enumerating cures: impotence,
of course, but blindness too; and rashes,
the kind that if you scratch, will bleed and bleed.

THE STREAM

Sign of the times, back then, how in one day
you'd be groin-shoved into a hydrant, half
faint, cop grinding a nightstick in your back,

then an hour later, aching in a stuffed chair
telling your first shrink you felt dizzy
in that crowd, or shouting *peace, peace*, you felt

rage kick-start inside like a Hell's Angel —
sweaty, bandannaed avenging angel, itching
to gouge somebody's lawn. Years, and what's left

of that session is the shrink's bored expression,
me staring out the window at children splashing
in a fountain, that water's thin stream back

to firehoses in Birmingham, their fierce
spray like machine guns knocking the kids down
to writhe in mud, to slip and fall in black

and white, as shaky cameras panned the scene,
then focused on one scrawny girl just far
enough out of the stream to stay on her feet

when the water started. All arms and legs
she stood there doing the twist, her whole body
one exuberant stuck-out tongue. I wanted

to know the tune that girl carried in her mind
to replay after the cameras were packed
and gone, to keep the gawky dance aching

in her elbows and hips. I would have paid for that,
for the shrink to hum, "Twist and Shout." Years,
and what's left of that day are the black kids

who walked the crowd's edge, mocking our prissy
peacenik chants, jutting gloved fists in the air.
One pulled me out of the cop's grip, held me

a long time, crooning, "hush now, hush,"
a huge cloud of hair wrapped in a red bandanna.
And what I wouldn't tell the shrink was how

I loved being his baby, being held
till the stream of bodies carried us
someplace familiar, and he let me go —

a kind of dance that defied the music,
I could have said, the way we wake from dreams
of flying, hair matted, covered with sweat.

TEST PATTERNS

Someone on the street smiles in your direction and you're not sure, but beam it back. Of course, the gorgeous guy is really greeting the gorgeous woman behind you, and now you're some kind of alien from a hot red-faced planet, wishing for quick transport to another erroneous zone, another warm body you might attach to, to keep from swirling into dissolution, another language to confess your puny sorrows in before this broadcast day concludes and sleep unplugs you. Perhaps you would like to see those photographs of outer space, its hot galactic swirls ignoring gravity, as if motion is all that matters and everything comes down to it? Before that happens, take a moment to recall light pricks through the steamy windows of a parked car, a boy whispering blunt directions in your ear — *come, go, down, up* — you trying to talk stars with him, why you feel like a cinder somebody's about to scrape off a boot tread. "Shut up," he probably said, smothering you with soggy lips. And it's not that you wanted your initials projected onto the moon, you just wanted that jerk to listen, wanted your breath inducted into the atmosphere, rising — OK, thinning to a molecule, just not fading out completely. It's like the little kid holding up his hand to halt Boston's rush hour. Standing on the corner, he made his voice fatherish as he could, and you wanted to stop for him, wanted him to believe in that hand, those wishes, but it would have caused a five car wipeout. You had to go on, among the multitude teaching him wishes are impotent, the world's full of ironically smiling grills, among which he's a pathetic squint. That's why you don't spend more clear nights on your back, on the picnic table, swatting mosquitoes, admiring the starry traffic jammed overhead. Though probably the kid goes home, drinks a lot of milk, years pass, he gets his license, and it's a good thing he doesn't

think he's king of the road, doesn't wrap his hand
across a girl's mouth, whispering she's beautiful like that.
Maybe he'll even talk to her, like the man beside you now,
chuckling as he falls asleep, who once leaned against
the kitchen sink stroking a cat so fondly it seemed
like a revelation: The world is created by touch,
Touch is good. *"So what's the big deal?"*
you heard a voice mutter inside, throaty, celestial.
Now, as your thoughts drift into test patterns, big blobs
the shape of your head, or your shadow on the wall
this morning, when the light tried to pass through
and couldn't, so landed on you instead — remember
how you closed your eyes and felt pure scintillation
backed up on your face — though it slipped through
the sieve of language, though nothing could calibrate
the force of that touch hitting the atmosphere,
busting into a jillion pieces at once.

THE TINY GATE

The steady turning of pages, students murmuring
in the stacks, children in boots clomping the stairs
with armfuls of picture books, easy to read aloud —

but I remember a stammering child, an engine chug
that couldn't get started, who only spoke alone
under the blankets, or along the riverbank practicing

plosives, fricatives. She'd poke the shallows with a stick,
murmuring stories from an overdue book of *Saints*
Every Child Should Know: Joan's one phobia, fire,

how they broke chair legs, bed posts, brush wood,
raised her higher on the stake. They twisted oily rags
around a split branch, Joan sobbed. The girl dog-eared

that page, threw rocks in the water. Joan begged,
she writhed and shrieked as flames caught her hem,
then just when she thought she'd burst, the book said

the voices which had left her flew back. A whole
volume of this, each story a roller coaster ratcheting up
its steep laborious crank on flimsy scaffolding —

then lights! voices! wings! — a plunge into fluency,
the dream of a hesitant child. What she couldn't say
bunched up like paper and twigs snagged in the reeds.

Weeks late with the book, its spine cracked, clueless
how to answer the librarian's wagging finger —
"What have you done?" — stammering, stammering,

her mouth was a tiny gate. To pass through, the words
broke themselves again and again, so even now I feel
the weight of that child, wishing for the drunk's smooth tongue

at the front desk, demanding yesterday's paper.

And when he kneels down to beg, it's the soldier painted
in my old book, dropped to his knees, finding Joan's heart

still beating in the ashes — the ecstasy I never had:

this fellow in frayed tweed, enjoying every second of his plea,
of the librarian flapping her arms, crying "Out! Out!"

All those years of logjam, afternoons leaning over the bank,
wishing I could just give myself to that river, and now I see
the river was giving itself to me.

THE GREAT AMERICAN BOTTOM

*The alluvial plain in southern Illinois
between the bank of the Mississippi and
the bluffs which border the prairie to the
east.*

The old cafe received the detritus
between the counter and front window.
Just in time she realized the strength
of her alluvium.
To be the great land the river flowed by,
to know the joy of goodness
which soaks within.
She held her wind and whistled to herself.
Her lungs soft bread boxes.
Her kneecaps bags of yeast.
It was the inner landscape of the mind
scraped clean of crumbs,
the edges of pie-crust crimped.
The lovely yes the lovely booth.
Who couldn't hope to wish
or to hop back for anything but *obquesence*?
All the burning on the rack.
Yet she knew the showers in the girls' gyms,
the chlorine smelling ovens.
Crookneck winter squash. Hoe cakes.
Meat pies.
She could enumerate them.
She's the woman swimming in the inner ear.
The figure mother in apron, hairnet,
taking orders from the river
the rascal passing river.

MONET'S WATER LILIES

I weep like a schoolgirl.

"The Tunnel," Mark Strand

I know these watery landscapes,
the afternoon shadows from trees
renovated for spring,
the light lifting handkerchiefs
for all the weeping schoolgirls do.
The lilies transport tears
like white monkeys
bearing boxes.
Why is it?
Last night I felt them again,
little lice on my face from the nest
of the eyes,
the falling of them over my lip
into the corner of my blouse.
Try to hold them back,
and the quivering face.
The tears forming ponds.
All parts giving into one another,
the shapes of light,
the magnetism of them toward form.
Somehow
they hold together.
Little bridges in the water
emerging then dissolving again in shadows.
It's why the apparent divisions after all,
the smaller bumps
and losses,
the little splashes over what matters.
The tears say
we know already we are in the throes of life,
the birth,
death,
the giving caretakers,
crying schoolgirls because we are women.

OKAY SO WHAT

okay so there was a gun okay so what
okay so he fucked me with it okay okay
okay so there was piss and shit and even
a little blood so what nobody
got herself killed not even
the dog he shot through the window
at and nobody had to eat
the dog to stay alive nobody had
to eat the body nobody cut
the body in half the baby
in half the blood filled nobody's
buckets not even a single
sponge nobody's face got shot
from her face nobody's face
was red because it was nothing
but scars so who did I think I was
to scream those dreams into night
after night his name his face
in my face I didn't even
except in dreams that came after
those dreams I didn't even kill him

LATER THAT DAY

1.

*Your mother doesn't see the animals
painted on that wall, he said. And point-
ing to his IV bag and tubes, Or that
antique, that fine cut glass.*

Later

that day, with no one else around, he said,
*You're in cahoots, I know you are, I'm going
out there to get my gun, I'm going to kill
you and throw your rotten body in
the river.*

Who'd often threatened to kill
himself. Who'd sometimes said *I love
you more than life itself*. Who'd hidden
his Scotch behind the jars of peaches
in the basement. Whose Scotch I found
and finished later that day —

2.

But I could see
the animals there, or anyway I knew
the way the wall breathes a little before
the colors begin to stir, the way the colors
slowly sharpen into form. I could make
that plastic crystal. I could get us out
of that room.

And I already knew
about the gun, that it aimed both ways
at once, the two-for-one one got by turning
on oneself. I knew how well a gun spoke,
from a drawer in a bedside table as well
as the back of a basement shelf.

The news
was it was him, not someone standing in
for him. The news was it was him
and it was me. Of *course* I was crying.

FLOOR STUDY

Sorry, kids, you messed
the exam: in *err* we trust,

in *er*, there's no ease in us
anymore, for any user.

And here's Li'l Miss Take
herself, she's crossed a line

she cannot see, a way-
ward vertical line, she says

there is no under under
where we are, just un-

swept dust. And is that it,
the what that bends

the fender, spills the milk,
burns the money, spoils

the work? Why is wrong
our right these days? Thank

you, it was nothing much
the same as nothing more —

In these bare scenes we love
to lose: she gives it up, he shuts

it down, and no one's left
to run the show, which goes

on under cover of some night
before we knew. We're down

to clean-slate work again.
Then it's a question of.

LINES OF FORCE

Peggy Shumaker, **Wings Moist from the Other World** (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994)

Forrest Gander, **Deeds of Utmost Kindness** (Wesleyan University Press, 1994)

Sophie Cabot Black, **The Misunderstanding of Nature** (Graywolf Press, 1994)

David St. John, **Study for the World's Body: New and Selected Poems** (HarperPerennial, 1994)

Leafing through a large number of poetry books published in 1994, trying to decide what I liked well enough to review, I found myself formulating three questions that helped me sort out books I was interested in from those that left me mostly indifferent. I do not propose these as infallible criteria for excellence or suggest that they constitute a complete formula for identifying the best poets currently working. They are simply a combination of what tends to interest me, as a reader of contemporary poetry, and what evolved from a good deal of curious browsing.

1. *What's being done with the line?* For better or worse, most poetry is written in lines. If the line is to be a meaningful unit, as opposed to a sort of perfunctory convenience, that will be reflected in the poet's characteristic uses of it. If the line is not used thoughtfully, chances are good that other attributes of excellence — overall design, verbal economy, rigor of diction, distinctive vision — will be wanting too.

2. *What's unusual or interesting about the diction?* It's certainly hard to prescribe any rules for effective diction. There is room, after all, for anything from deliberate simplicity to flamboyant complexity. But surely it's fair to ask that the poet be doing *something* that is unusual or remarkable with language. Words that seem both surprising and right, word combinations one wouldn't have expected but that persuade one with their accuracy and energy: these are some of the ways I formulated my appetite for poems with language that would make me sit up and take notice.

3. *Is there intense evocation of experience, especially experience of place?* The first part of this clause seems fair to me in a general sense, while the second part reflects a growing preoccupation of my own, as a writer setting increasing store on what some theorists and environmentalists call “bioregionalism.” To me, a commitment to sense of place by American poets has both an historical value — it is bound to increase one’s sense of how we got here and what the making of our culture has involved — and a stake in the future: in the current parlance of environmentalism, it has “green” value.

I realize that neither clause in my third question would seem a fair criterion to some, e.g. language poets, so I cheerfully admit that both halves of it reflect my own values and biases, as an editor, a writer, and a reader.

The first two books I chose are by mid-career poets who are not especially well-known. I’m not sure that reveals anything in particular, about them or about me or about what it means to be well-known, but I am happy to share my enthusiasm for work that might easily get overlooked. The third and fourth collections are, respectively, a first book and a selected poems by a poet who got a well-deserved nomination for the National Book Award. Just as their careers are at different stages, my poets by no means answer my three questions in the same way, and I’m well aware that what I find interesting about their handling of the line, their diction, and their evocation of experience may be somebody else’s anathema. But that’s enough apologia. Here are some good poets, and some reasons why they are good.



Peggy Shumaker’s third book, *Wings Moist from the Other World*, is my first encounter with her poetry. The book’s design is striking — thank you, Pittsburgh, for finally producing attractive books! — and the end-note tells me that she was born and raised in Tucson and currently lives and teaches in Alaska. Certainly her knowledge of the far north is one of the most interesting features of her work. Here is a poem called “Exit Glacier”:

When we got close enough
we could hear

rivers inside the ice
heaving splits

the groaning of a ledge
about to

calve. Strewn in the moraine
fresh moose sign —

tawny oblong pellets
breaking up

sharp black shale. In one breath
ice and air —

history, the record
of breaking —

prophecy, the warning
of what's yet to break

out from under
four stories

of bone-crushing turquoise,
retreating.

The poem performs well in relation to all three of my criteria. The short lines, expertly broken and distributed in couplet stanzas that usually pair a longer unit with a shorter one, maintain the attentive pace of the poem, a breathless excitement in the presence of size and mystery. There is a kind of rapid noticing of odd details that helps them associate with each other by placement, as when the phrase "breaking up," which technically deals with the contrast between the black shale and the tawny moose pellets, joins with the larger account of process that is the past and future of the glacier, the "record of breaking" and the prophecy of "what's

yet to break." It does this partly by virtue of standing by itself as an entire line. The short lines and short stanzas also help bring out the poem's rigorous music. Even if you read it silently, you are apt to sound it out carefully in your head, appreciating the springy density of sound effects captured in phrases like "Strewn in the moraine/ fresh moose sign —."

As for diction, there's an implicit celebration of language in the careful assembling of words that are exactly right because they are technical — moraine, sign, shale, pellets, calve ("*of an ice mass: to let break off and become detached*") — and words that kick in some metaphorical charge — turquoise, tawny, groaning. Even that distinction does the poem an injustice, however, since there's no sense of duality or binary opposition in the way that words are either chosen or placed. Observation and extrapolation are a single fluid event here, as the glacier calves from its "four stories // of bone-crushing turquoise" and its strange history continues.

Vivid evocation, in this case of place, is in a sense the end result of the other two factors. Shumaker brings us to an acute sense of what it's like to approach a glacier and sense its processes, and she captures the event by being precise about her language and incisive about her presentation. The coldness of it all — ice and air seem to coexist in the one breath, drawn and exhaled in the glacier's presence, as its history and future also coexist in its present — drives home the combination of strangeness and familiarity the poet is working with.

To fully appreciate this poem, you probably need to think a little about all that has been left out: exactly where, exactly when, who else was present, and a host of other distractions. Leaving them out needs to be not a matter of accident or oversight but a deliberate evocation of them in the poem as surrounding context. The reader is asked to sense a narrative that brings the witnesses to this moment and then see why the narrative is finally unnecessary to the moment itself. Deft construction, with a solid and satisfying result.

A similar accomplishment, this time with a less extraordinary setting, is to be found in "Three Notes from a Wooden Flute":

A moon with two points
cradles chill mist.
Where you are,
can you see it?

Moist starlight on new moss —
flannel blue, a melting
snow ridge

I care for this birch bud
so tightly wrapped
in itself
it seems solid

One passing shadow,
a trickle at the root,
a hush of breath
along the unclothed limb —

it will somehow know
to open

Here the natural details — moon, moss, snow ridge, birch bud — are more widely applicable than the glacier, though the setting is most likely Alaska again. The delicacy of observation is matched with a delicacy of emotion, an understating of sexual longing and a deep trust in natural process, to make a satisfying whole. The title adds another perspective, the idea of a simple, deliberate music, though I'm not sure precisely why it is "three notes" we are dealing with.

Lineation here again seems exactly matched to subject and mood, and the use of the second margin in the last two stanzas echoes the address to the loved one in the stepped-down line of the first stanza, reinforcing the duality of natural process and sexual desire that constitute the poem's closing chord. About the only particle of diction I'd question is "chill," in the first stanza, which seems a little too easy. With that exception, the poem persuades me once again by the care with which it tracks the details

of the speaker's surroundings and their reification of longing. This is a classic design — we find it in Chinese poetry, we find it in lyrics like “Western Wind” — and the more satisfying for its successful variation upon a familiar theme. I wish we set more value on the short, intense nature lyric, as a culture and as a subculture of poets and poetry readers. Mary Oliver has had a couple of big prizes, true, but her recent work is a good deal less rigorous and sharply observed than the two poems I've just cited.

My two examples from Peggy Shumaker do not do full justice to her range — this one-hundred page collection has fifty-two poems on a great variety of subjects and with many different kinds of length and form, plus three pages of useful notes — but they will surely help to show why I was drawn to her collection. Her care for line and language, coupled with her ability to evoke both the natural world and its mirrorings in emotion, make her work stand out from a number of the other poets I read.



Forrest Gander's collection, *Deeds of Utmost Kindness*, is his third. Again, this is my first sustained encounter with this poet, who might be said to dwell within hailing distance of the language poetry settlement (a somnolent community, in my view), and I found myself immediately drawn to the work by its variety of presentation — designs ranging from prose poems to haiku and settings as various as Japan, Russia, the Ozarks and, I presume, Rhode Island, where this poet currently lives and teaches. A friend of mine who has followed Gander's work tells me he likes this poet's previous collection, *Lynchburg*, even more, so I will make a point of seeking that out. Meanwhile, there is much to absorb me in *Deeds*.

Gander's notions of what he wants to write about and what means he might use to best convey his subject vary more widely than most poets'. The haiku to prose poem range implies that, as does the variety of places represented. If the collection's unity is a little threatened by this, the compensation comes in the reader's never quite knowing what to expect next. Here, from a section of poems set in the Ozarks, is a short take called:

Mandibles chewing blades.
A fiddleback in the attic dark.
Ozark notions, hand-made
in Japan.

Doe carcass, tall
grass, and wind.
Tailpipe flanged like a coot's claw.
Thimblefuls of rain on tin.

This quick-sketch assemblage of impressions has a good deal of word-play woven through it. You can associate those mandibles with farm machinery as well as with, say, grasshoppers. And my hunch that there was an insect called a fiddleback proved true, so that I could get to that old chair in the attic by way of the entomological link. The word "notions" tempts one both to link the furniture and mandibles to the borrowing of cultural ideas for foreign manufacture, and also to detach those lines completely, opting instead for the sense of "notions" that goes with the department-store meaning of ribbons and buttons and other small things.

Meanwhile, the wind will both move the tall grass gracefully and bring you the smell of the dead doe, while the resemblance between the tail-pipe and the coot's claw perpetuates the same interaction of nature and culture that began with the mandibles and fiddleback. The thimbles of the last line might qualify as "notions," and their contents' sound on tin matches the poem's music to the weather's, a surprisingly resonant finish for a poem that has needed only thirty-two words to complete itself.

Implicit in what I've said is my sense that Gander is using the line with considerable acumen, choosing his diction with unusual care, and evoking experience, especially that of place, with exceptional economy. The reader needs to bring a good deal of imaginative response to such a design and such a technique, but the results inspire both trust and enthusiasm.

Gander's prose poems are expertly managed too, but since

I'm partly discussing use of the line in these poets, I'll detour around them with a friendly nod and pick something with longer lines and a sustained, denser texture. Here is the first of a series of poems called "Librettos for Eros," memorializing the Arkansas poet and land surveyor Frank Stanford, who killed himself in 1978 at the age of thirty:

land surveyor

And came home with beggar ticks in his pubis
And the light syrup stink of urine in his jeans,
Godawful b.o., sat on the bed unlaced his redwings
And lay back on brown blood stains in the unmade
Sheets and the ferruginous odor of her period, saying
Holy holy holy, I do not feel kindly
To the copperhead in the cople-stones and the brown
Recluse making its nest in my underwear,
I hate poison sumac poison ivy poison huckleberry.
The ganglia of blackened liana
And the bowers of meshed kudzu trouble my step.
From spraddle-legged dumps, the fissure blooming between
my cheeks,
I said the degenerate itching of my locust-leaf wiped
butthole
Only increaseth among company. I have pointed my
sweatblind face
Through tents of webworms, I have lava-soaped striped
leeches
From bruised ankles, I have brushed the hair
Of outrageous arachnids and their eggsacks burst and
crawled
Every slake and chine of my sopranic skin.
Placed my unwitting palm on dead things nailed to
fenceposts,
Imagined bodies and parts of bodies in the footsucking
weedlots,

Startled at the crack of limbs in wheezing copses,
And I have grown strange.
But thou oh moon backsliding coolly from blue slips of
cloud
Over bare semi-dark autumn fields where the stars smoke
dimly for anyone,
Restoreth my peace.

The lineation keeps the poem moving forward at a steady, clenched pace. The longer lines, e.g. the next-to-last one, show great care and concern for what can be packed into a larger unit, while the calculation of the short ones, e.g. "And I have grown strange," is evident for its effective contrast. Keeping this cascade of detail moving forward effectively requires a sense of tempo, and the lineation, along with the speech rhythms and the caesuras, provides that tempo.

As to diction, it's evident that Gander is here taking a very different tack from the one in the poem quoted earlier. There's some word-play and compression, to be sure, but the main impulses here are inclusiveness and lavishness, something to match the mix of horrific energy and weird beauty in the poet/land surveyor's surroundings. Hence the biblical moments like "Holy holy holy" and "Restoreth my peace," and their shading into romantic diction like "trouble my step" and "only increaseth among company." Hence too the energetic compounds like "spraddle-legged," "footsucking," and "backsliding." Gander's adjectives do their work, and it takes a certain courage to opt for words like "feruginous" and to hew out lines like "Every slake and chine of my sopranic skin."

The last example may finally be over the top, but you have to like Gander for venturing it. There's no way he can get to the heart of this poem without a willingness to let language get as strange and tangled as kudzu or as unsettling as the brown recluse spider. It's an all-stops-out performance.

The fact that the poem is about a dead poet, along with the fact that it's about his love-hate relationship with the world, his aesthetic sense emerging through exhaustion and disgust to a

moment of peaceful contemplation, threatens its equilibrium. Whenever poets write about other poets, I've found — and I'm guilty of it myself, with Mandelstam and Basho and Henry Vaughan among others — they tend of course to portray themselves and to be in danger of amplifying the sentiment toward self-pity.

Hell, nobody understands us, can't we complain about it once in awhile?

In this case, however, the gritty details of Stanford's existence, right down to his rectal rashes, help keep the sentiment at bay. Gander's humor meshes with Stanford's, which was always one of the most attractive features of his work, and the result is a sequence — remember that this is just the first of seven poems dedicated to Stanford — that is memorable and moving without ever becoming marmoreal or maudlin. Gander shows himself, here and elsewhere, as a poet with a hot eye and a cool technique, a talent to keep track of and watch grow.



Sophie Cabot Black's *The Misunderstanding of Nature* is an impressive debut. Its most ambitious feature is an historical poem, "The Arguments," in the voice of Dorothy Bradford, wife of the first governor of the Plymouth Colony. She drowned off the side of the Mayflower, probably a suicide, just before the pilgrims finally went ashore. The poem is a kind of implicit challenge to Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and is written in a long line that, over twenty-one sections, has considerable cumulative force. I'm still unsure of my final assessment of its overall success. Meanwhile, I find myself drawn to Black's shorter lyrics, which reveal an unusual texture and sensibility. Here's one from the middle of the collection:

Good Friday

One small bone carried the length
Of the field, settling

Into the thick green like a dropped
Angel. Bees bully out

Into driven March light
Spreading like sudden blood.
They hang on air, bear away.

Deer brag across budding lots
Of clover while the risen
Moths confetti.

One lamb is missing. Two others
Blend into the shed wall; each eye
Shining; dark stones above
Noiseless, moving mouths.

Admiring the abrupt transitions here, I notice that they are created partly by lineation. Consider, for example, how that first sentence is distributed across those first four lines. I'm not sure the capitalizing of first letters on lines is altogether appropriate here, but that is a matter of taste any two poets could debate for hours. One would argue that they are an unnecessary residue of tradition, while the other would contend that they add to the sense of strangeness.

Black's diction has surprise and energy. It took me awhile to remember how bee swarms work, and until then I wasn't sure about the third line of the second stanza. I'm still not convinced that "brag" is quite right for the deer of the third stanza, but I go happily on to "the risen / Moths confetti," a delightful combination of observation and invention, including the transformation of a noun into a verb.

Early spring in a rural landscape. The superimposition of a spiritual tradition, Good Friday, with the normal events of nature around a farm in late March. This poet has an eye and ear for good detail. That final image of the lambs staring back from their shiny, stony eyes is one I will not forget.

One more example of how well Black can summon us to a rediscovery of the extraordinary with the ordinary:

The Converted

When those doves come for their evening weep
And the last sun kneels till the lawn is lit
From underneath,

When the tiny bats begin their arcs around the porch
And the older goats remember,
Running for the stable door,

The sky cracks again; the inexhaustible pours in.

Breezes swing down into fields, amulets.
Leaves chatter against the flagstone. Each house steadies
Into night like an airplane, silver propellers of light

Nosing out. The dog stands in front of the TV: Heston
Is Moses and Moses in color. Suddenly all is conspiracy.
Night dark pushes out the cold stone of moon; each lightbulb

Chooses a star to convert, to bring down.

This poem opens the collection, separate from the five sections into which it's divided, and it's a good choice to introduce us to this poet's world. As a friend to whom I showed it remarked, it reminds us that something quite remarkable takes place at the end of every single day, which is why we don't tend to notice. Our houses are taking off into darkness like airplanes and we allow ourselves to be distracted, like that comical dog, by religion and television.

Black is using a longer line here, to good effect, and her breaks and transitions, less abrupt, are no less magical. The diction walks a careful median between strange and ordinary, supporting a mixture of surprise and recognition while maintaining a

playful tone. The weeping doves are nicely melodramatic, in quotes, and the goats may be running to shelter because they have a memory of night birds called goatsuckers and bats that are supposed to be after their milk or their blood. The fun of all this, as in magical realism, does nothing to diminish the wonder.

Not every poem in *The Misunderstanding of Nature* achieves this consistent success, and as I said, my own mental jury is still considering the overall success of the long poem that closes the collection. Still, it's clear from the powerful language and distinctive vision of her work, that Sophie Cabot Black is a substantial new presence.



I close with an all too cursory look at the best-known and most substantial of these poets, David St. John. My excuse for brevity, besides a press deadline, must be that most FIELD readers are probably generally familiar with this poet's achievements, and that the work in this collection, an excellent selection from his earlier books along with eleven new poems, is more likely to be, for them, a rediscovery of strengths and favorites than a revelation of unnoticed talent.

I don't always share this poet's tastes, I find. He's enamored of a world of aestheticism, decadence, sexual dalliance, gorgeous artifacts and striking images of painful nostalgia. Sometimes he seems to want to raise gossip to a fine art, sometimes he seems to want to bring back Parisian Symbolism of a century ago, Mallarmé, Wilde and the whole climate of spoiled, voluptuous transcendentalist daydreaming.

Yet just when I think this is going to make me impatient, like inspecting somebody's orchid collection, I find myself suddenly hanging on his every word, waiting for the next detail to sweep me along. St. John loves narrative, and he's about as expert as anyone I can think of at weaving a hypnotic spell that carries you forward through a dreamlike choreography. In the striking double poem that gives the book its title, he does it simultaneously with two narratives, one moving down a left-hand margin, the other on the right. Here's a sample:

It was into those simple spirals
 Of exile & neglect
 I came to her, like any brother to ash,
 My own body's hardened, bloody hinges
 Stiff as every abacus of the dead,
 The graphs and paths of my nerves
 Vague as cumulus. Acres
 Of smeared butterflies rising
 Around me, lifting up from the plaid
 Grid of the fields. Bamboo oboes,
 Once silent, rehearsing again
 The notes of memory's
 Marginalia, its little vistas of
 Raving regret . . .

*The harmonies of the flesh,
 Spirit, and the air . . .
 It is the dance, then,
 Which enacts the **being** of
 Time, the dance
 Which renders a body
 Immaterial. So,
 We are the story, time,
 Just as my father's
 Body, a few hours
 After his death, stretched
 Out upon the bed, so
 Empty of spirit
 It seemed to float there . . .*

The roman text is titled "THE BODY OF DESIRE," its italic counterpart "*Of Time and the Body*." The first explores the relation of self and body through a detailed recollection of a passionate affair between a speaker and someone named Seven. The second is spoken by someone grieving for a dead friend (along with a dead father) who was a balletomane, obsessed by the body's relation to time as evinced through Balanchine's ballerinas. Between them, the two poems attempt to capture and define time and its relation to the body by a sort of enclosing movement, as if hoping that it will be glimpsed and understood in the white space between them.

For many readers, the idea that time or the body can be captured or understood somewhere between a voluptuary and a ballerina will not be persuasive. St. John's exoticism clearly threatens his phenomenology here. But to encounter the two texts, first together and then in their fragile but powerful dialogue, is to succumb steadily to St. John's program and progress. This is a poet who, if he diverts us with narrative, is also after the old high manner that lyric poetry used to be capable of. He makes us remember how great the stakes really were for Baudelaire, Valery, Mallarmé. He is quite willing to risk the unfashionable, even the ludicrous, in pursuit of his own vision. And the extent to which

he succeeds is powerful testimony to his remarkable command of technique.

The excerpt above cannot do justice to the whole, obviously, but it will at least illustrate the expert lineation, the precise and wide-ranging diction, and the evocative texture of the concurrent meditations. It's a fitting poem with which to close this thoughtful selection of previous and new work.

Illustrating St. John's world with whole poems is difficult, because so many of his best poems sustain themselves over several pages. Of the shorter pieces in the "New Poems" section, most are expert translations/adaptations, from Baudelaire and Cavalcanti. Here is the exception:

I Know

*The definition of beauty is easy;
it is what leads to desperation.*

— Valery

I know the moon is troubling;

Its pale eloquence is always such a meddling,
Intrusive lie. I know the pearl sheen of the sheets
Remains the screen I'll draw back against the night;

I know all of those silences invented for me approximate
Those real silences I cannot lose to daylight . . .
I know the orchid smell of your skin

The way I know the blackened path of the marina,
When gathering clouds obscure the summer moon —
Just as I know the chambered heart where I begin.

I know too the lacquered jewel box, its obsidian patina;
The sexual trumpeting of the diving, sweeping loons . . .
I know the slow combinations of the night, & the glow

Of fireflies, deepening the shadows of all I do not know.

It seems to me that this wants, and manages successfully, to be languid and mysterious while also mocking itself, camping the whole thing and its slightly swoony languor. How else explain the jewel box juxtaposed to the laughter of the loons? You have to look twice, at least, to see what's going on in a lyric of this kind, because it functions simultaneously on different levels: participating in romantic melancholy and assessing its limitations at the same time. But you can trust its expertly managed rhythms and its carefully strung diction.

This is an eloquence that constantly qualifies and questions itself. It prizes yearning and a high-flown manner, and it wryly and ruefully objectifies them too. Wallace Stevens is our modernist master of this style. Stanley Plumly can write this way, Charles Wright has mastered it. Among his generation, David St. John has made it his special territory. He has staked it out with an expertise and a relish that are heady, giddy, undeniable.

David Young



CONTRIBUTORS

BRUCE BEASLEY's second book, **The Creation**, won the 1993 Ohio State University Press/*The Journal* Award. He teaches at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

KILLARNEY CLARY's first collection, **Who Whispered Near Me**, was published in 1989 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and in 1993 by Bloodaxe Books in England. Her second collection, tentatively titled **Shine Empty in Daylight**, will appear next year in the *FIELD* Poetry Series.

MARTHA COLLINS' most recent book of poems, **A History of Small Life on a Windy Planet**, won the Di Castagnola Award and was published by Georgia in 1993. She is working on a new collection called **Some Things Words Can Do**, and, with the author and Yusef Komunyakaa, on translations of the Vietnamese poems of Hguyen Quang Thieu.

MATTHEW COOPERMAN is a graduate student at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He conducted this interview with Charles Wright by mail over several months last year.

RUSSELL EDSON's Selected Poems, **The Tunnel**, appeared this fall from Oberlin College

Press in the *FIELD* Poetry Series.

DIANE GLANCY teaches Native American Literatures and Creative Writing at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her third collection of fiction, **Monkey Secret**, is published by TriQuarterly.

BECKIAN FRITZ GOLDBERG is the author of two collections of poetry, **Body Betrayed** and **In the Badlands of Desire**, both published by Cleveland State. Her poem "Being Pharaoh," which appeared in *FIELD* 50, has been selected for inclusion in **The Best American Poems of 1994**. She teaches creative writing at Arizona State University.

ROD JELLEMA (**The Eighth Day: New and Selected Poems**, Dryad, 1985) wrote no poems for seven years, 1986-93. This is his second appearance since coming back.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, winner of the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for **Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems** (Wesleyan), sent us these poems from Australia.

SANDRA MCPHERSON's most recent collection of poems

is **The God of Indeterminacy** (Illinois, 1993).

MARTIN MOONEY was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1964. He currently teaches creative writing at Poets' House, Portmuck. His first collection, **Grub**, won the 1994 Brendan Behan Memorial Award.

The sequence of poems in this issue, "Then or Now," will be published in ADRIENNE RICH's new collection, **Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995** (Norton). Her most recent prose work is **What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics**.

YANNIS RITSOS' posthumous collection, **Late Into the Night**, from which the poems in this issue and in *FIELD 50* were taken, will be published this spring in the *FIELD* Translation Series. His translator, Martin McKinsey, teaches at the University of Virginia.

BETSY SHOLL's most recent book is **The Red Line** (Pittsburgh, 1992). She lives in Portland, Maine.

JAMES TATE won the 1994 National Book Award for his new collection, **Worshipful Company of Fletchers** (Ecco).

FREDERICK TIBBETTS's poetry has appeared recently in *The Paris Review*, *Raritan*, and *Antaeus*.

Though JONAH WINTER was born in Dallas, Texas (8-19-62) he dreams of some day starting his own Italian wedding band. He currently lives in San Francisco, where he makes his living writing children's books and playing in a rock 'n' roll band called *Ed's Redeeming Qualities*.

YU XUANJI, whose family name, Yu, means "fish," lived in China in the middle of the ninth century. Her life was short and rather unhappy, but she was clearly one of the most gifted poets of her generation, with a lively sense of her own talent and temperament. The translators, David Young and Jiann Lin, East Asian Specialist Librarian at Oberlin, are at work on a collection of her extant poems.

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